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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

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WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: July 13, 2007

FIRST EUROFIGHTER HAS LANDED

¶1. The first of Austria's fifteen Eurofighter jets, delivered from Germany, landed at the Zeltweg air base at 10:45 am Thursday morning and was greeted with a traditional brass band and an arch of water from a water cannon. Economics Minister Martin Bartenstein of the People's Party was the only government minister on hand to welcome the arrival of the plane. President Heinz Fischer and Defense Minister Norbert Darabos of the Social Democrats were on an official visit to Macedonia and therefore unable to attend the ceremony. Austrian media suggest that Norbert Darabos' absence was a deliberate move, given that the Minister has shown himself to be strongly opposed to the deal. Reporting on the arrival of the first Eurofighter jet in Austria on Thursday, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung points out that Defense Minister Norbert Darabos, whose party long opposed the purchase of the Eurofighter, is facing criticism from top military representatives in Austria. Lieutenant General Guenter Hoeffler, head of the joint chiefs of staff, said he regretted the minister's decision to cut the number of jets from 18 to 15 and the amount of negative comments that have accompanied the purchase of the planes. According to centrist daily Die Presse, the Austrian military has increased pressure on the Defense Minister over future planning for the military. According to experts, there are not enough funds for a necessary reform of the armed forces under the current budget. Mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung meanwhile suggests that the arrival of the first Eurofighter jet has caused yet another crisis in the coalition government: Economics Minister Martin Bartenstein's comment at the Zeltweg air base that he was "representing the Austrian government, so to speak" has outraged the Defense Minister, who was accompanying President Heinz Fischer on an official visit in Macedonia on Thursday. Darabos apparently considers Bartenstein's statement a transgression, the tabloid explains.

AUSTRIANS AND THE EU

¶2. Austrians remain critical of the European Union, with only 36 percent of interviewees saying that the country's EU membership is "a good thing," the most recent Eurobarometer survey shows. The poll has also revealed that acceptance of the EU is far more common among young Austrians, while older people are more skeptical. A recent Eurobarometer survey reveals that many Austrians have reservations about the European Union. Only about one third of interviewees believe Austrian EU membership is a "good thing," while 25 percent say it is a "bad thing." According to mass-circulation daily Kurier, this negative approach may be rooted in a feeling of helplessness among Austrians towards the EU. In fact, 62 percent

feel they have no voice in the EU. However, the European Union is not seen as critically by all: 48 percent of Austrians aged 15 to 25 say they consider their country's EU membership an asset. However, only 23 percent among Austrians aged 65 and older are convinced of the advantages of EU membership.

OECD CRITICIZES AUSTRIA'S TAX SYSTEM

13. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has presented a critical report of Austria's taxation system. In a country report due to be released today, OECD experts consider Austria's overall tax burden excessive and have suggested higher taxes on wealth and lower taxes on labor. According to the organization, the share of revenue from wealth taxes in Austria is only a quarter of the OECD average, writes ORF online news.

HOUSE VOTES FOR IRAQ PULLOUT

14. The United States House of Representatives has voted for the withdrawal of most US combat troops from Iraq by April next year. The move, which can still be vetoed by President George Bush, is aimed at putting pressure on the Senate to also vote for a troop pullout, Austrian media suggest. Earlier this week, President Bush presented a report on Iraq, which found that there had been only limited military and political progress following the deployment of extra troops. Semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung, quoting from the US report on Iraq presented earlier this week, says the situation in Iraq remains critical and security there continues to be "complex and extremely challenging." Reflecting the assessment of most Austrian media, ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal asks whether US President George Bush may have "lost touch with reality," given the conditions on the grounds in Iraq as presented in the report and the growing rejection of the President's Iraq policy in Congress. Independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten is just as critical in its assessment, suggesting that President "Bush's Iraq strategy has failed." Instability in Iraq is by now considered "irrevocable," and none of the key goals have been met fully as a result of the troop surge, the daily says. Likewise, centrist daily Die Presse says that "only 8 of 18 Iraq objectives have been achieved," and speaks of a "disillusioning report on Iraq." Similarly, mass-circulation daily Kurier writes about a "great disillusionment," and suggest that even the White House can no longer gloss over the reality in Iraq. Intelligence experts meanwhile paint a gloomy picture of the country's future, adds the daily. Liberal daily Der Standard in turn focuses on President Bush's optimistic assessment that progress has been made in Iraq. The US strategy is successful, the President argued, and again dismissed calls for a pullout of American troops from Iraq.

NORTH KOREA URGES DIRECT TALKS WITH US

15. North Korea is calling for direct talks with the United States on peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's military made the call for talks between military representatives, which would also include a UN envoy. Washington has replied that it can discuss a peace treaty after North Korea abandons its nuclear program. Meanwhile, a team of inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency left Vienna for Pyongyang last night to supervise the shutdown of the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, according to ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal.
McCaw